Virtual Creation, Simulated Destruction, and Manufactured
Memory at the Art Mecho Museum in Second Life

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It is not your typical art museum. The building's glass atrium is topped by a rotating tower built to resemble a giant nineteenth-century optical toy. The walls are made of translucent paper, and at night the building glows like a Japanese lantern. There is no roof. Patrons traversing the museum's catwalks and balconies sometimes lose their balance and fall crashing to the galleries below. Other visitors descend from the sky on jetpacks and make soft landings in the museum courtyard. And we have not even begun to describe the patrons themselves, or the art (Figure 1).

The museum is located in Second Life, a virtual online world in which hundreds of thousands of people each month log on from around the world and use avatars to interact with each other in a virtual, three-dimensional, user-built environment. Second Life (SL for short) bears some resemblance to massively multiplayer online video games like *World of Warcraft,* and it includes some game-like activities, but its open-ended rule base and customizable environment (everything from avatar clothing and bodies to local gravity can be adjusted by users) makes it more adapted to social, commercial, and artistic activities. For example, it is host to an enthusiastic network of artists and exhibitors who make, buy, sell, and display virtual art and architecture.

FIGURE 1. An aerial view of the Art Mecho Museum, with its rotating zoetrope tower. Photograph by author.

Compared with online war games, where players can forget themselves in a frantic rush toward annihilation, Second Life has an arguably different relationship to creation, destruction, and temporality, opening space and time for more deliberate reflection on the nature of digital art and identity.

In the middle of one of SL's oceans, on an archipelago governed by an educational consortium, stands the Art Mecho Museum. The name is borrowed from *Mechademia*'s term for the cluster of aesthetic, social, and theoretical practices surrounding Japanese anime and manga. The museum is devoted to this art.

I designed the museum in 2007 and built it in Second Life in collaboration with students and instructional technology staff at Williams College—or rather their avatars: all activity in Second Life, including construction, is conducted by or through these online agents (Figure 2).[1] The museum was intended as a kind of virtual laboratory to test or demonstrate certain ideas about how we interact with animated art. It is part of an effort to think about how criticism can be conducted not just on but within visual media. But the result is more a process or an experiment than a coherent critical statement,

FIGURE 2. A scene from the museum's construction, showing members of the build team floating in the distance. Each part must be created and shaped individually by an avatar working in Second Life, so structures come together progressively like real buildings (but there is nothing to prevent the second story from being constructed before the first). Photograph by author.

FIGURE 3. Avatar Kuri Basiat in the museum's business office. Photograph by author.

so in keeping with the open-ended or multifaceted quality of the project and the dual or multiple nature of identity in Second Life, I have chosen to describe the museum for *Mechademia* in the form of a conversation between myself and avatar Kuri Basiat, the museum's virtual director (Figure 3).

CHRISTOPHER BOLTON: Please start by telling our readers what inspired the project to build a museum like this.

KURI BASIAT: It was inspired by critical work in anime studies, especially around the experience of watching anime—how the experience of viewing anime differs from other media like prose fiction or so-called live-action film. Thinking about these questions requires the spectator not just to look carefully at anime but to step back and watch him or herself watching anime. Only by doing that can we start to think critically about how we experience this medium.

CB: Susan Napier talks about this using the idea of a "fifth look" that goes beyond other kinds of viewing. It is the power to look at yourself as you look at the film.[2]

KB: Yes, although Napier's idea, which starts from Paul Willemen's "fourth look," includes a kind of moral or ethical sense that relates to narrative content as well as the visual style.[3] Here I am thinking more specifically about the spectator's visual relationship to anime, his or her physical (bodily) and phenomenological or epistemological relation to the film. That is where Second Life can help. It forces the user to animate him or herself as an avatar, and then watch the animated self move through the museum and interact with the art. The exhibits are designed to provoke some thought about the relationship between these different layers or entities.

CB: Can you give our readers an example?

KB: Well, some critics have argued that linear perspective—with its depth and smooth recession into the distance—is not a neutral artistic device but a visual technology associated with surveillance, targeting, and power. It is something that enmeshes both the scene and the viewer in a web of control. These ideas have been applied to literature and film, but you and Thomas Lamarre have both argued that anime might offer a visual escape from these networks. Things like the combination of two- and three-dimensional elements in anime or its division of foreground and background into separate two-dimensional layers foil the logic of linear perspective and generate a sense of physical speed or freedom—Lamarre mentions Miyazaki Hayao's flying scenes. And this may generate a feeling of political freedom as well, a sense that the characters *and spectator* are trying to escape this web of control.[4]

CB: Yes, though I would add that the fantasy element often casts that freedom in an ironic light. It is only while we inhabit these fanciful, sometimes ridiculous worlds that we can fly above these webs, and the wry self-referential quality of the fantasy makes this hard to forget. Some of that has parallels in Second Life. By default the avatars mirror the abilities and constraints of human beings, except that they can fly. Avatars teleport and fly everywhere. Linden Labs, the company that created Second Life, has woven that into a metaphor for a world in which you can go anywhere, create and do anything, and this strain of naive utopianism clings to many discussions of Second Life:

the electronic frontier spirit, the altruism of online communities, the supposed freedom and equality imposed by the anonymity of your avatar, and on and on. But there is not always enough attention to the role of the virtual in all this. In Second Life I don't necessarily see the same irony or self-awareness about that fantasy that I do in anime. On a mailing list for educators in Second Life, someone suggested changing your avatar's race on January 15th in honor of Martin Luther King Day. That kind of silliness—

KB: —well, it might hold some interest in certain contexts. But yes I agree, it is easy to detect these utopian discourses surrounding SL, and hard not to pick them apart. What the museum represents is actually an attempt to refocus the discussion back on visual effects in animation and think more carefully about how specific visual tropes might function. Returning to my earlier point, Second Life is a visual regime like the one you and Lamarre have described: a mix of 3D perspectival modeling and 2D layering that alternates constantly between realism and fantasy, or between the illusionistic and the abstract.

CB: I am definitely interested in the way anime seems to oscillate back and forth between self-conscious two-dimensionality and a cinematic regime with apparent depth. That links to the oscillation you mentioned earlier, between immersion or suspension of disbelief and self-conscious spectatorship. I think there are many possibilities in that oscillation for making the viewer think about simulation itself. But in my experience these effects can be hard for the viewer to perceive and difficult for the critic to articulate . . .

KB: Exactly. So the art in the museum functions as a kind of visual metaphor for some of these operations that can help bring them to light. One of the museum's permanent installations, called "Muybridge Revisited," takes the smooth three-dimensional animation of SL and breaks it up into its component frames, to reveal the two-dimensional component. Eadweard Muybridge was the nineteenth-century photographer whose experiments in stop-motion and sequential photography arguably gave birth to cinema. His famous sequence of a running horse represents the first time a photographer had captured pictures of figures in rapid motion, pictures Muybridge and Thomas Edison eventually learned to reassemble for cinematic projection. The art in "Muybridge Revisited" decomposes the smooth motion of SL in the same way Muybridge did, to remind us not only of the history of animation but also of the gaps in our mediated vision. So in one part of the museum, when an avatar walks across the floor it leaves a trail of life-size two-dimensional figures

behind it, figures that seem to capture the successive postures in its stride, like a Muybridge sequence. The cutout figures remain for a while, drifting around the gallery like blown paper before they eventually vanish.

CB: That's evocative. But are we to see those gaps as spaces of possibility or lack?

KB: That is a good question. In the eighteenth century, Friedrich Schiller identified this as a central problem of subject formation. Schiller posed the existence of a "sensuous drive" that allowed humans to move and change by recreating themselves over and over in successive instants, while the "formal drive" connected these discrete lived existences into a coherent self through reason. Like Kant and other German Idealist philosophers, Schiller believed that art could reconcile these drives and unite the realm of concrete experience with that of abstract moral reason.[5] But today, poststructuralist philosophy has been concerned precisely with breaking down these unities of spirit and exposing the gaps in those seemingly smooth surfaces of meaning, narrative, and self.

CB: So what we are talking about is a kind of video game based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and poststructuralism?

KB: In a way! Though relating the visual art with the underlying critical theory is a challenge in Second Life, which is almost resolutely nontextual. The interface makes it difficult to present or communicate long pieces of text to museum visitors. It's a world of enforced semiliteracy. But we've embraced that challenge to suggest the richness of these theories largely in visual terms.

CB: How?

KB: Again, the key is capitalizing on the ability of the art to interact with the avatar and making the spectator (the user) think about that interaction. The other piece of "Muybridge Revisited" is based on a zoetrope—a nineteenth-century optical toy that allowed the animation of sequential drawings and eventually Muybridge's sequential photographs as well. It consists of a spinning drum with images along the inside wall. A conventional zoetrope is small enough to fit on a table, but ours is twenty meters across and several stories high. It doubles as the main tower of the museum, and visiting avatars can fly up inside it and see Muybridge's images of the running horse become

animated. But our tower does not work quite like a real-life zoetrope. There are some unexpected effects that come from the multiple levels of simulation, from trying to animate an animation device inside SL. The levels of simulation set up interference patterns with one another, patterns that allow the spectator to think again about those gaps that exist in an animated simulation, and animation's ability or inability to portray or critique itself.

CB: What do the interference patterns look like?

KB: It is easier to grasp visually than to explain in prose (that is precisely the point!) but the rapidly spinning tower rotates at a rate approaching the screen refresh rate for the SL application on your computer, which makes the tower appear to slow down and even spin backwards, while the images of the horses become animated and start to run. It's a phenomenon called aliasing, what is referred to in early cinema as the "wagon wheel effect" . . .

CB: . . . where the spoked wheels in old westerns would appear to spin slowly or backwards because the frame rate of the camera corresponded closely to the periodic motion of the wheels.

KB: Yes. That does not happen in animated film, but it reappears in real-time computer animation like SL.

CB: Though animated film has sometimes simulated aliasing to masquerade as a more cinematic medium, just like animators simulate optical distortion, lens flare, or camera shake to appear more like live-action film. It is again part of this oscillation between the cinematic and the stylized.

KB: "Muybridge Revisited" aims to expose some of these operations.

CB: But breakdowns in the smooth animation inside SL are not rare or surprising in themselves. In fact, doesn't SL have a second-class status among real-time online gamers, who prefer worlds without museums, worlds like *World of Warcraft Online* that are optimized for combat? And numberless anime have been translated into interactive video games, on platforms where the visual effects are more sophisticated than in SL. Why not look at them?

KB: There are interesting things being written about those platforms, but we are not writing about SL; the museum itself is our critical text. Unlike *World*

of Warcraft, content in SL is user-generated, and that enables us to develop content that comments on the nature of animation and simulation itself, to turn the camera (the simulating machine) back on itself. I will give you an example: right now we are mounting a show by Eron Rauch called "Leveling," which consists of screenshots taken from *World of Warcraft,* images he transformed editorially and (re)exhibited in SL.

CB: Rauch may be familiar to our regular readers as the photographer behind the cosplay spread in *Mechademia 2.*

KB: This project relates to Eron's earlier work in that it deals to some extent with role playing and identity, but it is really more focused on the idea of landscape and location. One of the galleries at the museum features a series of vertical canvasses suspended in mid-air. The canvasses are insubstantial, so the avatar can walk right up to the art and pass through it to the other side, and find him or herself standing in front of the next image in the sequence. We were hoping some artist would take advantage of the format to design something around this idea of the spectator merging with the art, and Eron came up with a series of images taken from *World of Warcraft* that showed progressively more severe glitches in the rendering engine: points where whole chunks of the world disappeared or dissolved into abstract shards of color (Figure 4). The canvasses are large and occupy your whole view, and as you walk through them, you first experience a kind of simulation within the simulation—a feeling that you have been transported into *World of Warcraft* within Second Life. Then you encounter a controlled dismantling of that simulated reality that is surprisingly evocative, even disorienting. Eron calls it a "satori moment."

CB: That format for exhibiting the art reminds me of some innovative anime and manga exhibits at conventional museums that we have featured in *Mechademia.* At Vienna's Museum of Applied and Contemporary Art (MAK), a manga exhibit displayed pages of manga enlarged to life size and placed in vertical panels hung from the ceiling, giving viewers the feeling that they were walking through the panels of the manga itself (Figure 5).[6]

KB: Yes, that exhibit was among the inspirations for the Art Mecho Museum.

CB: But Rauch's "Leveling" project exists exclusively in Second Life?

FIGURE 4. A member of the museum staff (in mech armor) inspects Eron Rauch's installation "Leveling," a consideration of digital landscape based on material from another multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft*. The canvases at right recreate rendering glitches in a way that immerses avatars in a disintegrating virtual world. At left a massive collage ironically memorializes hundreds of dead avatars Rauch encountered on his online travels. Photograph by author.

KB: No, actually it is based on a gallery exhibit of his printed photographs. Eron captured the images from *World of Warcraft* sessions, then generated the photographs for his gallery show, and later at our request converted them back to online SL images for the Art Mecho Museum.

CB: Reverse importation.

KB: Or simulacra. In one of the series that make up the "Leveling" show, called "Travels," Eron took landscapes from *World of Warcraft* and processed them to appear like nineteenth-century black-and-white landscape photography of the American West by Timothy O'Sullivan or William Henry Jackson. One guesses that those prints must have a materiality and presence in the gallery that contrasts with the digital, but unfortunately they lose that in the translation into SL; but other images that might appear cartoony or abstract in a real-life gallery suddenly become "realistic" in the Art Mecho Museum because they look so similar to the surrounding reality or context. The rendering glitches I described are an example.

CB: Let me shift gears slightly, without leaving that larger point about the

possibilities those layers of simulation generate for commentary or metanarrative. The theme of this volume of *Mechademia* is War/Time. You have talked a lot about time and duration in the context of the "Muybridge Revisited" exhibit, and now we're onto war, or at least *Warcraft*. The comparison with O'Sullivan and Jackson also seems to relate the frontier of *World of Warcraft* to the conquest of the American West. Does Rauch's installation comment on the violence of some of these narratives?

FIGURE 5. A 2006 manga exhibit at Vienna's Museum of Applied and Contemporary Arts (MAK). Photograph courtesy of the exhibit's curator, Johannes Wieninger.

KB: It does. The centerpiece of the "Leveling" show is a series of screenshots of hundreds of dead avatars he encountered traversing the levels of the game. These were originally exhibited in the gallery show as panels of small photographs, but for the Art Mecho installation, Eron arranged them in a huge mosaic, ten meters high and over thirty meters long in the scale of the museum. It is visually quite beautiful, but not at all poignant. It is death abstracted.

So SL can comment on things like that. But at the same time, the idea that SL is a pacifist artistic reinvention of the first-person shooter is part of the naive utopianism you referred to earlier. That FPS legacy is never far beneath the surface. Many avatars in SL are armed to the teeth, and even the scripting language used to program the museum's interactive exhibits bears traces of being optimized for virtual warfare, with code examples and function calls that often refer to guns, impacts, and explosions. At a genetic level that informs the art.

CB: And of course SL has its own cultures of virtual violence. It is possible to hack buildings and other avatars in various ways. But while the victims take these virtual attacks pretty seriously, some of the perpetrators seem to regard them as a kind of performance, no more or less dangerous than subversive art.[7]

KB: Yes, the museum has been hacked before, sometimes by its own builders. We originally had an automatic door that was supposed to rise out of the way when an avatar approached, but a programming error caused the door to

stay in place and the rest of the building to leap six feet into the air whenever someone got near the entrance. Sometimes the designers and builders introduced those kinds of things deliberately for effect. The text of the building itself has a quality of instability and literary play to it. There is also more destructive vandalism and harassment in SL, and as you hint, that also makes a fascinating study. But again my interest is in elements of control and surveillance that inhere in less obvious aspects of the interface itself. For example, the "camera" that gives the user his or her view of the world is not strictly tied to his or her avatar, so the user's viewpoint can separate itself from the avatar's body. That division has interesting implications for how the avatar looks at the art, but it is also inherently voyeuristic. You never know where people are looking. You can spy on what Jack's avatar is doing in an upstairs room while your avatar remains downstairs talking to Jane's. I think it would be interesting to leverage that power in a future installation.

CB: What other work do you now have on display?

KB: Yasmin Saaka did a custom installation for us of a series of floating canvasses the avatar walks through. These are the same kinds of canvasses Eron Rauch used for the glitchy landscapes series, but Yasmin took a completely different approach and produced an autobiographical piece. Let me back up a little: most of the two-dimensional art in typical Second Life galleries and museums hangs on the virtual walls in virtual frames just like in real life. We developed the idea for those floating canvasses before we had any art to go on them, but our thought was that viewing them would be a little like reading a manga, looking at each page, zooming in, then walking into the art and through it to "arrive" at the next page. Yasmin is an up-and-coming American manga artist: she debuted a few years ago as runner-up in TOKYOPOP's Rising Stars competition. She produced a manga sequence for us called "4me," which represents her own trajectory as an artist. It consists of a series of self-portraits, all in the shōjo idiom, but each in the style of a different artist who has influenced her: Tanemura Arina, Watase Yuu, CLAMP, and finally a fourth canvass in her own style (Figure 6).

CB: I'm looking at the photos, and the first three look virtually identical to me. And they all look like Japanese schoolgirls.

KB: There are subtle differences in the styles, but Yasmin is also playing with the homogeneity of shōjo manga. It's a piece about the changing versus the

FIGURE 6. Museum patron Frenchy Prudhomme looks at images from Yasmin Saaka's "4me" series. Photograph by author.

essential elements of manga style, and how you find your own voice within that, especially as an American manga artist. Saaka says some readers seem to want her work to be more Japanese, others more American, and some more African American. She also talks about trying to develop conventions for portraying African American features in an idiom that seems to lack any good precedents for it.

CB: So as your avatar walks through the canvasses and merges with Saaka's successive avatars in the drawings, you are supposed to think about the status of duplication and originality vis-à-vis your own digital identity.

KB: Potentially, yes. The piece connects questions about the status of race and gender in virtual communities back to ideas about style and genre that are also relevant to the discussion.

CB: How do you plan to incorporate this interaction between art and avatar in future exhibitions?

KB: We are working on plans for a show called "Shadow Box" that would feature wall-size manga pages with a limited 3D quality, so that avatars could

climb up into the panels and pose with the drawn characters. The idea is that you could change the narrative by acting in the story.

CB: And how can readers see more of these exhibits or find out more about the museum?

KB: Our Web site, http://artmecho.org, has additional information. Those who would like to visit us in Second Life can get a free account and follow the directions to the museum that are on the Web site.

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Notes

1. Mitch Brooks produced the initial blueprints and elevations for the museum based on my design. The building was constructed in *Second Life* by a team of colorful avatars manipulated by instructional technology interns at Williams College: Jonathan Berch, Isaac Bernstein, Alda Chan, Teia Fanciullo, Marcus Freeman, Allegra Hyde, Benjamin Kolesar, Kefei Lei, Moaj Musthag, Theresa Ong, Peter Schmidt, and James Sweeney. The project received help and support from the Faculty Center for Media Technologies at Williams and Williams Instructional Technology staff, including Gayle Barton, Mika Hirai, Trevor Murphy, Adam Wang, and particularly Jonathan Leamon, our virtual foreman on the build. I also owe a considerable debt to Bryan Campen, Jen Caruso, Aaron Collins, John Craig Freeman, and Christian Hudak, who advised me at various points in the project.

2. Susan J. Napier, *Anime from "Akira" to "Princess Mononoke"* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), 242.

3. Paul Willemen "The Fourth Look," *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and The British Film Institute, 1994), 99–110.

4. Thomas Lamarre, "The Multiplanar Image," *Mechademia* 1 (2006): 120–43; Christopher Bolton, "Visual and Political Dynamics in *Blood: The Last Vampire*," *Mechademia* 2 (2007): 125–42.

5. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters,* ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

6. Christopher Bolton, "UAAAAAA! Trashkultur! An Interview with MAK's Wieninger," *Mechademia* 2 (2007): 298–300.

7. For an introduction to these cultures, see Julian Dibbell, "Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World," *Wired* 16, no. 2 (February 2008): 90–97.